synthetic

ADJECTIVE & NOUN

Etymology

Summary

Either (i) a borrowing from French. Or (ii) a borrowing from Latin.

Etymons: French *synthétique*; Latin *syntheticus*.

< **French** *synthétique* (1652 in Hatzfeld & Darmesteter), or **modern Latin** *syntheticus*, **<** **Greek** *συνθετικός*, **<** *συνθετός*, participial adjective of *συντιθέναι* (see **syntheme** *n.*). Compare **Italian** *sintetico*, etc., **German** *synthetisch*.

Meaning & use

(In most senses opposed to **analytic** *n.* & *adj.*)

ADJECTIVE

1. *Logic*, *Philosophy*, etc. Proceeding from causes or general principles to consequences or particular instances; deductive: cf. **synthesis** *n.* 1. **1697–**

1697 Synthetic is that which proceeds from the most simple Principles, to those things which are compounded of those Principles.
translation of F. Burgersdijck, *Monitio Logica* ii. 135

1697 The Sciences Theoretical, such as Physicks, Metaphysicks, Mathematicks, &c. are disposed in Synthetick Method.
translation of F. Burgersdijck, *Monitio Logica* ii. 136

1798 Synthesis, or the Synthetic Method, is the searching out truth, by first laying down some simple and easy principles, and pursuing the consequences flowing from them till we arrive at the conclusion.
C. Hutton, *Course of Mathematics* vol. I. 3

1832 [Philosophy] proceeds (on general topics) either from principles to consequences (the synthetic order); or from consequences to principles (the analytic order).
A. Johnson, translation of W. G. Tennemann, *Manual of History of Philosophy* 33

***a*1862** By reasoning from the twofold ideas of action and of sympathy, Hunter constructed the deductive or synthetic part of his pathology.
H. T. Buckle, *History of Civilisation in England* (1864) vol. II. vi. 572

1869 [He] descends into phenomena by Newton's synthetic method.
J. Martineau, *Essays Philosophical & Theological* 2nd Series 184

logic

2.a. *Chemistry*. Pertaining to or involving synthesis; of organic compounds, produced by artificial synthesis: see **synthesis** *n.* 4. **1753–**

1753 *Chambers's Cyclopædia* Suppl.

1796 It appears from the synthetic experiments that the grain becomes finer as the proportion of tin is increased.
G. Pearson in *Philosophical Transactions* (Royal Society) vol. 86 430

1806 A decisive synthetic proof of the nature of this acid.
W. Henry, *Epitome of Chemistry* (ed. 4) 148

1857 Synthetic Production of Organic Compounds.
W. A. Miller, *Elements of Chemistry: Organic* (1862) i. §3. 69

1899 The chromatin (nuclein) in some manner regulates the synthetic metabolism of the cell.
T. C. Allbutt et al., *System of Medicine* vol. VI. 491

organic chemistry

2.b. Of a substance: made by chemical synthesis in imitation of a natural product (cf. **syn-** *comb. form*). Also, esp. of a man-made fibre or fabric: made from synthetic materials rather than natural ones (cf. **man-made** *adj.*). **1874–**

1874 Synthetic cymol obtained from normal bromide of propyl and crystalline bromtoluol.
Chemical News 12 June 265/1 (heading)

1907 Synthetic resins.
Chemical Abstracts vol. 1 1179 (heading)

1907 Since 'synthetic' indigo was put upon the market in 1897, some uncertainty has existed regarding its tinctorial value as compared with the natural dyestuff.
Nature 25 April 614/2

1909 Process of manufacturing synthetic resins as substitutes for shellac, consisting in treating *o*-cresol with formaldehyde in the presence of an acid.
Chemical Abstracts vol. 3 1818

1932 She had discovered..that synthetic stockings wore better than pure silk.
B. Hedworth, *Foolish Pelican* ii. iv. 136

1941 Mechanically, natural rubber is not surpassed by any synthetic rubber. However, in resistance to swelling by organic liquids..and deterioration by sunlight or oxidising agents, synthetic rubbers have been found superior.
Journal of Royal Aeronautical Society vol. 45 145

1946 The du Pont company..commenced the manufacture of a synthetic fibre which has since become known..as nylon.
A. J. Hall, *Standard Handbook of Textiles* i. 66

1955 Synthetic or imitation cream.
J. G. Davis, *Dictionary of Dairying* (ed. 2) 1005

1955 The first man-made forest of such a size to be used for large-scale paper-making.
Times (Supplement) p. ii/1

1966 Rayon is a man-made fibre but not a synthetic fiber. Nylon is a synthetic fiber.
McGraw-Hill Encyclopedia of Science & Technology (revised edition) vol. V. 242/1

1973 The cleaning of man-made fibres is usually a relatively simple operation which involves a treatment with a mild soap or a synthetic detergent solution.
Materials & Technology vol. VI. 485

1983 In the 19th century, before the boom in organic chemistry that followed the discovery of synthetic dyes, many prominent chemists had undertaken analyses of inorganic natural substances.
Scientific American April 73/3

textiles | organic chemistry

2.c. *figurative*. Artificial, imitation, invented. **1930–**

1930 With the synthetic idiot, Harpo, you must have a vein of the ridiculous in your laughter gland if boredom is to be kept at bay.
Daily Express 16 October 10/5

1932 A printing press upon which were struck off bogus service certificates for ‘synthetic veterans’.
Sun (Baltimore) 29 August 8/2

1934 Even when launched in a preliminary fashion, with say fifty or a hundred users, the synthetic language will not grow of itself.
American Speech vol. 9 101/2

1948 The synthetic, phoney film business.
‘N. Shute’, *No Highway* iv. 92

1948 He has been in London long enough to achieve a synthetic British appearance.
Newsweek 10 May 34/2

1949 I have seldom heard such an outburst of indignation... It seemed to me a little synthetic.
Hansard Commons 12 December 2417

1976 The learned, synthetic smile of the marketplace.
E. Fromm, *To have or to Be?* (1979) ii. iv. 92

2.d. *Aeronautics*. Of training, exercises, etc.: simulating on the ground what is performed in the air; also *elliptical*. Similarly of equipment used in such training. **1942–**

1942 All sorts of gadgets and synthetic devices are used..from the cine-film assessor..to the Fisher trainer.
Tee Emm (Air Ministry) vol. 2 93

1944 We are now in the middle of 'synthetic'—i.e. doing things on the ground as they will be done from the air.
Horizon January 49

1948 If people can go for an hour or two in the evenings for synthetic training.
Hansard Commons 15 March 1808

1949 There is ample mathematical and electric knowledge in existence to-day to construct 'synthetic aircraft' to simulate the flight of any proposed aircraft from the design data.
Aircraft Engineering April 122/2

1956 *Synthetic*,..artificial or simulated, as in *synthetic combat mission, synthetic training device*, etc.
U.S. Air Force Dictionary 504/2

1976 Complementary process of behavioural engineering and the selection and training of pilots..Performance prediction. Synthetic flight training. Performance assessment.
R. Hurst, *Pilot Error* 260

aviation

3. † Pertaining to grammatical construction. *Obsolete*. *rare*. **1778**

[1589 That it [*sc.* speech] should cary an orderly and good construction, which they [*sc.* 'the first learned artificers of language'] called *Synthesis*.
G. Puttenham, *Arte of English Poesie* iii. viii. 130]

1778 The Third sort of Parallels [in Hebrew poetry] I call Synthetic or Constructive: where the Parallelism consists only in the similar form of Construction.
R. Lowth, *Isaiah* Prelim. Diss. p. xxi

grammar

4. In the philosophy of Kant, (*a*) applied to judgements which add to the subject attributes **1819–**

not directly implied in it; (*b*) pertaining to the synthesis of the manifold.

1819 Analytic or synthetic marks. Those are partial conceptions of the actual conception.., these, partial ones of the merely possible whole conception.
J. Richardson, translation of I. Kant, *Logic* Introduction 80

1836 The synthetic unity of consciousness.
J. W. Semple, *Kant's Metaphysic of Ethic* p. lxvii

1839 All speculative *à priori* knowledge ultimately rests upon such synthetic or extending judgments; for though the analytical are highly important and requisite for science, still their importance is mainly derived from their being indispensable to a wide and legitimate synthesis, whereby alone a new acquisition in science can be made.
Penny Cyclopaedia vol. XIII. 175/2

1839 The synthetic activity of the judgment.
Penny Cyclopaedia vol. XIII. 177/2

1856 J. F. Ferrier, *Institutes of Metaphysic* (ed. 2) 25 (note) .

philosophy

5.a. Of, pertaining to, consisting in, or involving synthesis, or combination of parts into a whole; constructive. **a1703–**

In quots. *a*1703 and 1798 applied to the logical method more conventionally called *analytical* (the opposite of sense A.1); cf. quot. 1833.

***a*1703** The methods of attaining this end may be two, either the Analytick, or the Synthetick. The first is proceeding from the Causes to the Effects. The second from the Effects to the Causes.
R. Hooke, *Discourse Earthquakes* in *Posthumous Works* (1705) 330

1773 Both these theorems are so easily derived from the preceeding analysis of the problem, that it is needless to add the synthetic demonstration.
S. Horsley in *Philosophical Transactions* (Royal Society) vol. 64 280

1798 There are two methods of teaching; one which ascends from particular facts to general principles, the other which descends from the general principles to particular facts; one which builds up, another which takes to pieces; the synthetic and the analytic method.
M. Edgeworth & R. L. Edgeworth, *Practical Education* vol. I. iii. 115

***a*1825** Analytic or synthetic, from the whole to the parts, or from the parts to the whole.
H. Fuseli, *Lect.* x, in J. Knowles, *Life & Writings of H. Fuseli* (1831) vol. II. 373

1833 Some..call this mode of hunting up the essence the Analytic; others again, regarding the genus as the whole, the species and individuals as the parts, style it the Compositive, or Synthetic, or Collective.
Sir W. Hamilton in *Edinburgh Review* vol. 57 236

1873 Since painting is..work emphatically synthetic (being the union of many forms and colours and lights and darks into artistic wholes).
P. G. Hamerton, *Thoughts about Art* xii. 181

1887 Its [*sc.* the mind's] activity in combining the sensations into the more complex presentations of sense... This combining activity is best called 'synthetic', or constructive.
G. T. Ladd, *Elements of Physiological Psychology* ii. vi. 388

5.b. Concerned with or using synthesis. **1864–**

1864 The synthetic habit of mind.
P. G. Hamerton in *Fine Arts Quarterly Review* May 238

1877 That vague and general insight..which..was more frequently affirmed by the synthetic poet than by the scientific man.
J. Tyndall in *Daily News* 2 October 2/4

6. *Grammar* and *Philology*. Characterized by combination of simple words or elements into compound or complex words; expressing a complex notion by a single compounded or complex word instead of by a number of distinct words. (Opposed to **analytical** *adj.* 5.) **1816–**

1816 The third class [of languages] would..be that in which the principal parts of speech are formed by a synthetical operation of the mind, and in which several ideas are frequently expressed by one word. Such are what are called the Oriental languages, with the Latin, Greek, Slavonic, and others of the same description. These I would call *synthetic*.
P. S. Du Ponceau in *Transactions Hist. & Lit. Comm. American Philosophical Society* (1819) vol. I. 401

1835 By this change the Latin language of western Europe passed from the synthetic to the analytic class.
G. C. Lewis, *Ess. Romance Language* i. 26

1845 Synthetic forms are not necessarily strictly parallel with the analytic ones of the same import.
Proceedings of Philological Society vol. 2 168

1870 The synthetic character of ancient languages, compared with the analysis which distinguishes their modern representatives.
F. W. Farrar, *Families of Speech* i. 27

1875 The loss of formal grammatical distinction by synthetic means.
W. D. Whitney, *Life & Growth of Language* vi. 105

grammar philology

7. *Biology*. Combining in one organism different characters which in the later course of **1859–**

evolution are specialized in different organisms; having a generalized or undifferentiated type of structure.

1859 Sauroid Fishes and Ichthyosauri are more distinctly synthetic than prophetic types.
L. Agassiz, *Essay on Classification* 178

1872 Synthetic or generalised plants, having rhizomata resembling those of some ferns, stems having the structure of Lycopodium [etc.].
H. A. Nicholson, *Manual of Palæontology* 482

life sciences

8. *Mathematics*. Applied to ordinary (as distinct from *analytical*, i.e. algebraic) geometry. **1889–**

1889 Elementary Synthetic Geometry of the Point, Line and Circle in the Plane.
N. F. Dupuis (title)

geometry

NOUN

A product obtained by artificial synthesis rather than from natural sources; esp. a synthetic fibre or fabric. Chiefly *plural*. **1934–**

1934 in *Webster's New International Dictionary of English Language*

1940 The scientists could see in such synthetics [*sc.* plastics]..the threat of maladjustments in industry.
New Statesman 16 March 361/1

1943 The company built the new plant at its own expense in an effort to increase supplies of the badly needed synthetic.
Sun (Baltimore) 10 February 4/2

1951 Perfumery synthetics and isolates.
P. Z. Bedoukian (title)

1957 Trapping becomes less and less profitable as synthetics displace furs.
Times 12 November (Canada Supplement) p. v/3

1972 Lightweight suits cut from one of those shiny Japanese synthetics.
D. Bloodworth, *Any Number can Play* ii. 10

1982 There was a sudden scramble to get out of synthetics—those expensive 'fuels of the future'.
Sunday Times 9 May 54/5

textiles

Pronunciation

BRITISH ENGLISH

/sɪnˈθɛtɪk/

sin-THET-ik

U.S. ENGLISH

/sɪnˈθɛdɪk/

sin-THED-ik

Pronunciation keys

Frequency

synthetic is one of the 5,000 most common words in modern written English. It is similar in frequency to words like *corridor*, *heel*, *municipal*, *secular*, and *throne*.

It typically occurs about ten times per million words in modern written English.

synthetic is in frequency band 6, which contains words occurring between 10 and 100 times per million words in modern written English. More about OED's frequency bands

Frequency data is computed programmatically, and should be regarded as an estimate.

Frequency of *synthetic, adj. & n.*, 1750–2010

* Occurrences per million words in written English

Historical frequency series are derived from Google Books Ngrams (version 2), a data set based on the Google Books corpus of several million books printed in English between 1500 and 2010.

The overall frequency for a given word is calculated by summing frequencies for the main form of the word, any plural or inflected forms, and any major spelling variations.

For sets of homographs (distinct entries that share the same word-form, e.g. *mole*, n.[1], *mole*, n.[2], *mole*, n.[3], etc.), we have estimated the frequency of each homograph entry as a fraction of the total Ngrams frequency for the word-form. This may result in inaccuracies.

Frequency of *synthetic, adj. & n.*, 2017–2024

* Occurrences per million words in written English

Modern frequency series are derived from a corpus of 20 billion words, covering the period from 2017 to the present. The corpus is mainly compiled from online news sources, and covers all major varieties of World English.

Smoothing has been applied to series for lower-frequency words, using a moving-average algorithm. This reduces short-term fluctuations, which may be produced by variability in the content of the corpus.

Compounds & derived words

Sort by Date (oldest first)

polysynthetic, adj. **1805–**
Linguistics. That incorporates several or all syntactic elements of a sentence into one word; characterized by polysynthesis. Cf. incorporating, adj...

mathetic, adj. **1815–**
Relating to knowledge or to the process of learning.

electrosynthetic, adj. **1843–**
Of or relating to electrosynthesis; produced by electrosynthesis.

synthetist, n. **1848–**
= synthesist, n.

syntheticism, n. **1863–**
Synthetic character or method.

synthetic biology, n. **1864–**
†a. An approach to biology which focuses on the understanding of complex and integrated systems rather than on the properties of their component...

photosynthetic, adj. **1897–**
Of, relating to, involved in photosynthesis; produced by photosynthesis; (of an organism) capable of photosynthesis.

chemosynthetic, adj. **1898–**
Of, relating to, or characterized by chemosynthesis; chemotrophic.

synthetic rubber, n. **1906–**
Any of various synthetic materials, typically polymeric hydrocarbons, having some properties of natural rubber.

psychosynthetic, adj. **1913–**
Of or relating to psychosynthesis.

biosynthetic, adj. **1917–**
Of or relating to biosynthesis; produced by biosynthesis.

semi-synthetic, adj. **1946–**
That is a mixture of synthetic and natural materials, or has been prepared by artificial modification of a natural material; that is a combination of...

synthetase, n. **1947–**
= ligase, n.; also, a synthase.

Synthetic Cubism, n. **1947–**
A type of Cubism involving the combination or reorganization of forms, rather than their analysis (see Cubism, n.).

nucleosynthetic, adj. **1960–**
Of, relating to, or designating nucleosynthesis.

synthetic aperture, n. **1962–**
A simulated aperture obtained by moving an aerial or detector transversely during reception so as to increase its effective length; usually...

synthon, n. **1967–**
A constituent part of a molecule to be synthesized which readily lends itself to an operation of synthesis.

synthetic cannabinoid, n. **1970–**
Any of various synthetic compounds which mimic the effects of tetrahydrocannabinol and other constituents of cannabis, often used as recreational or...

retrosynthetic, adj. **1972–**
Designating a synthetic method in which a desired molecule is hypothetically broken into simpler fragments over a number of steps, allowing a...

Synthetic Cubist, n. & adj. **1981–**

synthespian, n. **1989–**
A computer-generated character in a film.

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